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THE ALCHEMISTS.

[“Remarks upon Alchemy and the Alchemists, showing that the Philosopher’s Stone was a Symbol.”—Published by James Miller, New York, 1867.]

We have referred in a previous article to the transition of Religion into Speculative Philosophy. The Mystics who present this phase of thought, “express themselves, not in those universal categories that the Spirit of the race has formed in language for its utterance, but they have recourse to symbols more or less ambiguous, and of insufficient universality to stand for the Archetypes themselves.” The Alchemists belong to this phase of spirit, and we propose to draw from the little book named at the head of our article, some of the evidences of this position. It is there shown that instead of the transmutation of metals, the regeneration of man was in view. Those much-abused men agreed that “The highest wisdom consists in this,” (quoting from the Arabic author, Alipili,) “for man to know himself, because in him God has placed his eternal Word, by which all things were made and upheld, to be his Light and Life, by which he is capable of knowing all things, both in time and eternity.” While they claim explicitly to have as object of their studies the mysteries of Spirit, they warn the reader against taking their remarks upon the metals in a literal sense, and speak of those who do so, as being in error. They describe their processes in such a way as to apply to man alone; pains seem to have been taken to word their descriptions so as to be utterly absurd when applied to anything else. In speaking of the “Stone,” they refer to three states, calling them black, white and red; giving minute descriptions of each, so as to leave no doubt that man is represented, first, as in a “fallen condition;” secondly, in a “repenting condition;” and thirdly, as “made perfect through grace.” This subordination of the outer to the inner, of the body to the soul, is the constantly recurring theme. Instead of seeking a thing not yet found—which would be the case with a stone for the transmutation of metals, they agree in describing the “Stone” as already known. They refer constantly to such speculative doctrines

as “Nature is a whole everywhere,” showing that their subject possesses universality. This metal or mineral is described thus: “Minerals have their roots in the air, their heads and tops in the earth. Our Mercury is aerial; look for it, therefore, in the air and the earth.” The author of the work from which we quote the passage, says by way of comment: “In this passage ‘Minerals’ and ‘our Mercury’ refer to the same thing, and it is the subject of Alchemy, the Stone; and we may remember that Plato is said to have defined or described *Man* as a growth having his root in the air, his tops in the earth. Man walks indeed upon the surface of the earth, as if nothing impeded his vision of heaven; but he walks nevertheless at the bottom of the atmosphere, and between these two, his *root* in air, he must work out his salvation.” A great number of these “Hermetic writers” established their reputation for wit and wisdom by discoveries in the practical world, and it is difficult to believe that such men as Roger Bacon, Van Helmont, Ramond Lulli, Jerome Cardan, Geber, (“The Wise”), Avicenna, Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, and others not inferior, could have deceived themselves as the modern theory implies, viz: that they were searching a chemical recipe for the manufacture of gold. The symbolic form of statement was esteemed at that time as the highest form of popular exposition for the Infinite and the religious problems concerning God, the Soul and the Universe. It seems that those writers considered such words as “God,” “Spirit,” “Heaven,” and words of like deep import, as not signifying the thing intended only so far as the one who used them, comprehended them. Thus, if God was spoken of by one who sensuously imaged Him, here was idolatry, and the second commandment was broken. To the Platonist, “God” was the name of the Absolute Universal, and hence included *subject* as well as *object* in thinking. Hence if one objectified God by conceiving Him, he neces-

sarily limited God, or rather, had no real knowledge of Him. Said Sextus, the Pythagorean: "Do not investigate the name of God, because you will not find it. For everything which is called by a name, receives its appellation from that which is more worthy than itself, so that it is one person that calls, and another that hears. Who is it, therefore, that has given a name to God? *God*, however, is not a name for God, but an indication of what we conceive of him." From such passages we can see why the Alchemists called this "Ineffable One," *Mercury, Luna, Sol, Argent vive, Phœbus, Sulphur, Antimony, Elizir, Alcahest, Salt*, and other whimsical names, letting the predicates applied determine the nature of what was meant. If a writer, speaking of "Alcahest," should say that it is a somewhat that rises in the east, and sets in the west, gives light to the earth, and causes the growth of plants by its heat, &c., we should not misunderstand his meaning—it would be giving us the nature of the thing without the common

name. Every one attaches some sort of significance to the words "Life," "God," "Reason," "Instinct," &c., and yet who comprehends them? It is evident that in most cases the word stands for the thing, and hence when one speaks of such things by name, the hearer yawns and looks listless, as if he thought: "Well, I know all about that—I learned that when a child, in the Catechism." The Alchemists (and Du Fresnoy names nearly a thousand of these prolific writers) determined that no one should flatter himself that he knew the nature of the subject before he saw the predicates applied. Hence the strange names about which such spiritual doctrines were inculcated. "If we have concealed anything," says Geber, "ye sons of learning, wonder not, for we have not concealed it from you, but have delivered it in such language as that it may be hid from evil men, and that the unjust and vile might not know it. But, ye sons of Truth, search, and you shall find this most excellent gift of God, which he has reserved for you."

EDITORIALS.

ORIGINALITY.

It is natural that in America more than elsewhere, there should be a popular demand for originality. In Europe, each nation has, in the course of centuries, accumulated a stock of its own peculiar creations. America is sneered at for the lack of these. We have not had time as yet to develop spiritual capital on a scale to correspond to our material pretensions. Hence, we, as a people, feel very sensitive on this point, and whenever any new literary enterprise is started, it is met on every hand by inquiries like these: "Is it original, or only an importation of European ideas?" "Why not publish something indigenous?" It grows cynical at the sight of erudition, and vents its spleen with indignation: "Why rifle the graves of centuries? You are no hyena! Does not the spring bring forth its flowers, and every summer its swarms of gnats? Why build a bridge of rotten coffin planks, or wear a wedding garment of mummy wrap-

page? Why desecrate the Present, by offering it time-stained paper from the shelves of the Past?"

In so far as these inquiries are addressed to our own undertaking, we have a word to offer in self-justification. We have no objection to originality of the right stamp. An originality which cherishes its own little idiosyncrasies we despise. If we must differ from other people, let us differ in having a wide cosmopolitan culture. "All men are alike in possessing defects," says Goethe; "in excellencies alone, it is, that great differences may be found."

What philosophic originality may be, we hope to show by the following consideration:

It is the province of Philosophy to dissolve and make clear to itself the entire phenomena of the world. These phenomena consist of two kinds: *first*, the products of nature, or immediate existence; *second*, the products of spirit, including what modifications man has wrought upon